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CHAPTER TEN

YILMAZ GÜNEY'S BEAUTIFUL LOSERS: IDIOM AND PERFORMANCE IN TURKISH POLITICAL FILM

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The Problems of Defining Political Film in Turkey

The phrase *political film* embodies a variety of concepts such as the word *politics* itself which is a derivative from *polity*, i.e. *governing people*. It is this function of the Turkish state –to govern people– which has created one of the main tensions in the writing of the history of political film in Turkey. Cinema in Turkey from its start has had a difficult relationship with the state. As a modern and capitalist invention that was produced in the industrialized countries of the world, cinema arrived as a controlled art in Turkey. Although the founder of the Turkish Republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, is said to have referred to cinema as the most important art (resonating V.I. Lenin), cinema did not prosper in the single party era between 1923-1950. In this period, filmmaking was controlled by the state and placed in the care of a single person, Muhsin Ertuğrul, who preferred to produce melodramas or patriotic epics. The production of political film by necessity required a polity, a nongovernmental group of individuals who freely express their opinions. The control of film production in Turkey during the time of Atatürk and the ensuing one-party era had its roots in the modernizing ruling elite's intolerant attitude towards the liberal media for more than a century. The Turkish traditional ruling elite has always been the military and civilian bureaucrats since modernization efforts began in the 19th century; the poor people of Anatolia could only respond passively to these modernization attempts by either ignoring these developments or by seeming to affirm them through participation in newly organized civic life. In the absence of strong opposition and democratic expression of dissent until the Democrat party

came to power with free general elections in 1950, Turkish cinema was ideologically/politically very much controlled by censorship (the state censorship board had to approve a film before its release) and the control of the flow of film material (like the quotas imposed on importing film negatives). Until the 1970s there were films that had elements of politics in their narrative but one could not easily call them examples of political cinema in Turkey. Turkish political film was restrained until one visionary actor, writer, producer and a practicing real-life revolutionary himself, Yılmaz Güney, arrived on the Turkish political and filmic scene. Like all countries with state-sanctioned censorship, the polity found different ways to express their opinions. Yılmaz Güney personified such expression through the characters he created wherein he used a combination of anti-capitalist idioms and rebellious performances.

To scholars of Turkish cinema the phrase 'political film' brings Yılmaz Güney to mind. Over the last three decades there has been substantive critical acclaim of Güney's films by both Turkish and foreign film critics and scholars. Starting with *Umut* (Hope, 1970) and continuing with *Sürü* (*The Herd*, 1978), *Yol* (*The Way*, 1981) and ending with *Duvar* (*The Wall*, 1983) there has been much international scholarly writing on Güney's cinema. However, both Turkish and foreign critics did not have access to over 100 films made between 1963-1971, where Güney is the lead actor playing the rebellious common man. These films were lost for a variety of reasons both economic and political. The economic reason was that Turkish film distribution and the system of exhibition was poorly organized and distributors did not want to keep previously exhibited films in an archive, as there were no means for further profit from them.¹ The political reason came after the military coup of 1980 when Yılmaz Güney and his legacy was banned by the junta leaders. His films were all collected and preserved under poor conditions and these film negatives and prints eventually deteriorated over time.² After the year 2000, social and technological developments made it possible for film critics to view these long lost and forgotten films that made a name for Güney as the *ugly king* (Çirkin Kral) of Turkish cinema. The 11 films directed by Güney had been secretly taken abroad by Yılmaz Güney's wife in the 1980s. The remaining lost and burnt films lived through the video revolution of the 1980s in the shelves of Turkish guest workers' video stores in Germany.

¹ Kirel, Serpil *Yeşilçam Öykü Sineması* (Yeşilçam Narrative Cinema), İstanbul: Babil Yayınları, 2005, p. 42.

² Özgüç, Ağah, *Bütün Filmleriyle Yılmaz Güney* (The Complete Films of Yılmaz Güney), İstanbul: Agora Kitaplığı, 2007.

The longing these workers felt for their country as they left Turkey in the 1970s created a cultural need to see those Turkish films banned in Turkey but available in video markets throughout Germany. These films featured Güney the actor and after the lifting of all bans concerning Güney in 1992 and with no censorship law in effect, these videos have now been transferred to VCD and DVD. There are some 22 films unaccounted for but we have around 100 films with Güney as an actor before he started directing. In these films Güney was the anti-capitalist folk hero who rebelled against his fate. Most of the characters he portrayed were vagrants. Through these characters, Güney criticized the capitalist system and its ills in Turkish society.

Yılmaz Güney represents a breaking point between the popular cinema and political cinema in Turkey. His stories, characters and themes reflect the political 'angst' of the 1970s. He also has a unique place in Turkish cinema as the unattractive lead. The characters he portrayed were people on the margins: unemployed, poor vagabonds. Güney portrayed these lonely anti-heroes who resisted the capitalist system in Turkey through their hanging on to life. In creating these heroes Güney leaned on the Turkish popular folk tales and their rebel hero, the urban lumpen proletariat, as a loser character with a specific body language and a peculiar vocabulary. In his later films Güney's lumpen characters took on a darker political tone. They were no longer lonely Robin Hoods in the slums, the members of the lumpen proletariat who stole from the rich to give back to the poor. They were now rebels who fall victim to both the conservative traditions of society and state oppression during the military coup between 1980-83. Hence this paper will discuss a typology of Güney's characters' relating the effects of his political message to two elements –that of *idiom* and that of *performance*– in relation to his political approach.

Yılmaz Güney: A Rebel Against the Capitalist State

Here I claim that the *idiom*, the vocabulary which Güney's characters use, is a representation of the common man's rebellion to state-sanctioned capitalism in Turkey in the 1970s. The individual's role and position with respect to the capitalist system and the state apparatus that protested the interests of the capitalist class is the main target of criticism in Güney's films. Güney's idiom is anti-capitalist and anti-authoritarian. Here I use the word *idiom* in a different sense from the word *discourse*. Sociologist Anthony Giddens refers to idiom as "the stocks of knowledge routinely

drawn upon by members of the society to make a meaningful world.”³ Such knowledge is the product of hundreds of years of Anatolian resistance to centralization by the Ottoman Empire and later to the authoritarian bureaucratic rule of the Turkish Republic. There is a bureaucratic state tradition in Turkey that is patriarchal and protective. This type of administration was borrowed from the Ottoman Empire where all land belonged to the sultan and people were managed thus. This is a different mode of organization compared to feudal Europe and later to the capitalist bourgeois organization of European societies. In the Anatolian system, the ruled are the subjects. They are protégés of the sultan and the state. People are part of a greater whole, a community whose best interests are managed by the sultan and the military-civilian bureaucracy. The lives and properties of common folk are secondary to serving and saving the state, a tradition that loosely continued into the newly created Turkish Republic.⁴

Against such a powerful state and its ruling elite, the common people created oral narratives of dissent, rebel tales that valorized the lonely hero that takes to the mountains and puts up a good fight until the very end. The two word-concepts common folk use in these stories are *mazlum* (innocent but suffering due to wrongdoing), and *mağdur* (the victim of wrongdoing). Turkish folk stories like those about Koroğlu, a common man oppressed by the mighty governor of Bolu in the thirteenth century, are still relevant as there have been films made recently in Turkish cinema about his rebellion.

As a popular tool of mass communication, cinema in Turkey could not stand still without expressing the dissent of the common man. National cinema movement directors like Memduh Ün, Metin Erksan and Halit Refiğ produced heroes from common men in films like *Üç Arkadaş* (*Three Friends*, 1958), *Yılanların Öcü* (*The Wrath of the Snakes*, 1962), *Susuz Yaz* (*A Dry Summer*, 1963) and *Gurbet Kuşları* (*Birds of Exile*, 1965). The heroes of these films are ordinary peasants or poor immigrants in big cities who want to go on with their simple lives but are oppressed by either a government official or the local landlord and eventually they fight back. These films valorized the common folk and presented them as tragic heroes. Throughout these works this tragic hero puts up a noble and a

³ Giddens, Anthony, *The New Rules of Sociological Method*, London: Hucheson 1976, p. 52.

⁴ Mardin, Şerif, “Center-Periphery Relations: A Key to Turkish Politics?” *Daedalus*, 1973, p. 170.

lonely fight. This character, and the narrative elements around him, later became a golden formula in Turkish cinema, so that the righteous and just hero wins against all odds and beats the villainous landlord or corrupt ruler of the land.

Until Yılmaz Güney's characters arrived in the Turkish cinema, the popular imagination of a screen hero was of a different type of hero, presenting a different use of idiom and performance. Turkish cinema had a bourgeois, educated and an elite hero addressing the audience's need to imagine a better life for themselves in the rapidly changing economic environment of the 1950s and '60s. The white-bred, golden haired, gentle and handsome hero expresses the desires of the urbanites for upward mobility and decorum. Throughout films in the 1960s this urban elite hero overcame all obstacles set in front of him with his bourgeois values instilled by a good family and neighborhood. This type of hero was dubbed the *jön* (the lead actor adapted from the French term *jeune*), coming from the French term for the lead actor. Actors like Göksel Arsoy, Ayhan Işık, Orhan Günşiray were the clean-shaven urbanite gentlemen of Turkish cinema in the 1960s. It was at this point that Yılmaz Güney debuted as an actor with a different background, manners, lifestyle, and political standing and the type of characters he portrayed were entirely different from those of the rest of the actors mentioned above.

Güney was known as the *ugly king*, a nickname he gave himself during an interview with journalist Agah Özgüç referring to Ayhan Işık's nickname as the king. Why should Güney want to name himself this? It is because the heroes he portrays are not positive characters, they are anti-heroes. These characters are mafia bosses, vigilantes, transients – people who live on the edges of society bending and breaking or simply ignoring the laws of the state. These anti-heroes, lumpen bourgeois characters, Güney portrays are constantly appearing in Güney's cinema thought his career. Moreover, Güney's heroes get more and more active towards the second half of his career as a director. After three military coups the hopes for a peaceful change in Turkey are drowned and the only way to stand up, as a person, is to rebel against the state of things as Seyid Ali does in *Yol* (The Way, 1981).

To give examples from Güney's *idiom* I will focus more on the period where Güney was a lead actor, from 1963-1971; his above-mentioned *ugly king* period. Such political cinema that uses a rebellious idiom against capitalist oppression is not unique to Turkish cinema. There are similar

cinematic movements in the west that parallel Güney's political and independent cinema approach: Third cinema and American independent cinema. Third cinema, as coined by Solanas and Gettino, is a cinema of the cheap and dirty and its subject matter is people and their struggles. The idiom and performance in these films present their characters with the realistic, harsh and esthetic use of real places and includes common people as actors. Pontecorvo's *Battle of Algiers* (1966) is a case in point.

The other cinematic approach where the actor-director presents an idiom and performance attacking capitalism is the American independent cinema. In terms of production, John Cassavetes' control as the actor-director over the creative aspects of the film overlaps Güney's second phase as the actor who financed his own films and made political statements. In terms of aesthetic choices John Cassavetes and Güney differ a lot, but their political attitudes and financial and expressive freedom are parallel. The two actor-directors belong to the same period in their countries. They came to fame as rough looking anti heroes. Cassavetes rose to fame and received his Oscar nomination with *The Dirty Dozen* (Robert Aldrich, 1967) and became known internationally for *Rosemary's Baby* (Roman Polanski, 1967). Both men used their money and fame to produce a political persona and a revolutionary, independent cinema. The Peter Falk character as the lumpen worker in American society is the type of character Güney manages to portray in Turkish cinema. But why does Güney choose these characters to portray? It should be noted that in both third cinema and American independent cinema, realistic performance is the key, whereas Güney has no pretensions to being a realistic actor; quite the opposite, for he presents an emotionless and larger than life performance.

Yılmaz Güney's Idiom and Performance: The Lumpen Proletariat in Turkish Cinema

The creation of Güney's anti-capitalist message is a combination of his idiom and performance. In the two films I will discuss below the idiom/key words used represent the common man's stand against capitalism. In the performance, since they are stereotypical, the body language and emotional expressions are kept to a minimum. There is also *play* in the performance, as Güney's characters make fun of the capitalist villains in a variety of ways. Here I define performance as restricted (or double performed) behaviors. Performances are social roles that we act out in everyday life as we take on certain roles.

Güney's performance is marked by his physical expression and body language –his idiom in the creation of his anti-capitalist lumpen revolutionary. Güney's performance is symbolic and reflective. The cinema allows Güney to represent his ideas in both an aesthetic and social ritual codified to represent the common man's point of view. It is almost a play as it is not bound by the bourgeois rituals of 1960s Turkish cinema. It is in fact anti-ritual in a Quixotic sense. This type of codified acting creates a new level of charisma in an almost ritualistic manner. Paul Ekman classifies body language and facial expressions to explain acting fundamentals.⁵⁵ As there is no real concern for realistic acting in Güney's cinema, Ekman's six basic expressions for the actor's face to create target emotions do not apply to Güney's lumpen character.

So who is Güney's lumpen character? The commonly used word lumpen to refer to a certain type of person comes from the Marxist term *Lumpen proletariat*. This word was first used by Marx and Engels in *German Ideology*, published in 1845. The pair uses the word as a derogatory term to mean the refuse of all the classes, referring to the idle, unproductive beggars often found in brothels. The word has an additional meaning in Turkish; that is, depicting a lower class person. Dictionaries define the term as: "the type of person who is on the margins of society and mistreated by others as he pretends to be knowledgeable and to have proper manners". For the poet and essayist Selim İleri a typical example of a lumpen proletariat in Turkish cinema is the 'Ömer the Tourist' character created by Sadri Alışık. Ömer the Tourist is a poor man who does not forget to make fun of his living conditions. Even as he is mistreated he still hangs on to life with hope.

The noble savage characters in Güney's films react to the wild capitalism in their idiom and performance. The lumpen proletariat created in Turkey in the 1960s and 1970s was due to displacement caused by rapid industrialization in the cities. Rural peasant laborers lost their jobs as machine oriented farming started. They had to leave for the cities in search of industrial jobs. The new environment had opportunities but also threats. Since land ownership came late to Turkey compared to western countries, state-owned unoccupied land was seized by new comers. Squatter housing erupted. A new suburbia was born outside cities where the poor, once-peasant workers had to toil all day and then return to their uncomfortable

⁵ Schechner, Richard, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, London: Routledge 2006, p. 2.

homes. Their families and hopes were to be integrated into urban life but that did not happen. State services could not meet the health and education needs of these people. Generation after generation, the immigrants were underpaid and became the hard-working under class. Their hopes diminished slowly and some who were left out by the system or ignored the rules of the system became vagabond cons.

These people have a different code of conduct and jargon in their daily lives. They have no jobs. They go to cafés to hang out and gamble, drink tea and coffee, and talk about soccer and women. They name their common code of conduct (in terms of both idiom and performance) as *racon*, meaning the method, the way. The secondary meaning of the word is showing off, or boasting. Associated with *racon* is the word *delikanlı*, or young blood. A *delikanlı* is a Young Turk, a wild one, one whose blood boils. *Delikanlı* is a person who is a man of his word, he is honest and honorable.

In recent Turkish cinema, *Gemide* (On Board, 1998), *Dar Alanda Kısa Paslaşmalar* (Offside, 2000), *Barda* (In the Bar, 2006), *Laleli'de Bir Azize* (A Saint in Laleli, 1998), *Ağır Roman* (Cholera Street, 1998), *Tabutta Rövaşata* (Summersault in a Coffin, 1990), *Camdan Kalp* (Heart of Glass, 1990), and *Düştürü Dünya* (Singalong World, 1986) had such lumpen characters as anti-heroes. This type of character owes a lot to Güney's films made in the 1960s. Film critic Agah Özgüç calls the rough anti-hero character in Güney's films the ever unshaven lumpen. These characters represent the bottom of society; they are looking for a paying job, yet try to look at life from the brighter side. Güney's such characters appear in films directed by others like *İkisi de Cesurdu* (Both were Brave, 1963), *Kurbanlık Katil* (Killer for Sacrifice, 1967), and *Ben Öldükçe Yaşarım* (I Live as I die, 1965) and some of the films directed by himself like *Umut* (Hope, 1970), *Ağut* (Elegy, 1971), *Umutsuzlar* (The Misfortunates, 1971). The first example I will discuss for how this character personifies Güney's political construction of an anti-hero is *Blood Will Flood/Kan Su Gibi Akacak*.

Kan Su Gibi Akacak (Blood Will Flood, 1969)

Blood Will Flood is a remake of the earlier film, *Vengeance Fire/İntikam Alevi*, starring Ayhan Işık –the leading actor in Turkish cinema, nicknamed the king– and written and directed by veteran director Osman F. Seden in 1956. The film's storyline is almost exactly the same as its predecessor but as we will see the idiom and performance differs: Ali

escapes from prison and takes refuge with a friendly fisherman, Temel. Ali was wrongfully accused and sent to prison for a crime he did not commit. Ali used to be an idler, but he gives up his ways and becomes an honest, hard working person.

Ali has a job in a small machine shop and earns the love and trust of the owner. He is happy with a fiancé and planning to be married. Just then his enemies set in motion a plot to get rid of him. To get to him they set up a rape scene involving his brother and force Ali to marry that woman instead. His jealous son next kills Ali's boss and Ali is blamed for the murder. Eventually Ali runs from prison and takes revenge, losing his fiancée in the process.

Ali is referred to as *delikanlı*, a key word throughout the film. The other characters are portrayed as schemers, rapists, and crook capitalist murderers. The reason these people do evil deeds is their greed related to capitalism and consumerism, both in their idiom and performance. We see them talk about their want of more. Ali only wants to have what he earns justly. In the end Ali is the one rejected by society –by these greedy people.

Both male and female characters are decadent as a result of capitalism in the film. Women characters are shown at the end of moral decadence. The two evil women in the film are Gönül and her mother. The mother wants to sell off her daughter to someone wealthy and her daughter does not mind. The male characters are also devoid of morals. The son can kill his father for greed and jealousy. He can frame an innocent man with rape and murder. On the outside, the urban capitalist characters look clean-shaven with nice clothes and smiling faces in contrast to Ali's rugged looks. But inside they are schemers and cold-blooded murderers. Ali and Elif, as modest, honest and emotional people, are the antithesis of the capitalist characters.

Ali loses against the capitalist state mechanism and an unjust justice system which favors the rich and powerful. Ali is now *mağdur*; this is a much more complex concept used to express innocence in the face of false accusation and mistreatment. The capitalist system does not offer control mechanisms to prove Ali's innocence. When Ali's brother is tricked with a sleeping pill and framed for rape, no one stands up for Ali and his brother. Ali is never the source of any wrongdoing; instead all evil comes to him by way of the capitalist greed surrounding him. Ali has to marry a woman

he does not love and he has to go to prison for a murder he did not commit.

Ali then becomes *mazlum*, the word for a person who suffers due to wrongdoing. Ali does not resist this wrongdoing; instead he faces it with quiet dignity. The movie then makes a critical turn. Ali decides to take the law into his own hands, risking death. He escapes from prison and takes revenge on his enemies one by one. Ali loses Elif, one thing he built his hopes on, and pays the price of being a lone protester against the system. Ali is one tragic lumpen character Güney portrays; another type is that of the comedic lumpen character Güney creates in his other films, the most notorious of which is *Recep From Kasımpaşa*.

Kasımpaşalı Recep (Recep From Kasımpaşa, 1965)

Recep, the protagonist in *Recep From Kasımpaşa* (1965), is a young immigrant who is penniless. He does not have any of the benefits the capitalist system offers yet he wants them all. He desires the pretty urban girls waiting for their boyfriends. He constantly expresses his fondness for one of the girls and as a result is beaten by urban boys on motorcycles regularly every week. Once again, in this film bourgeois youth both male and female are shown as decadent consumers lacking morals. The urban women use their femininity in a seducing way giving them an almost demonic air. Suat the leader of the rich urban kids is a total snob who wears leather jackets, roaming through the streets of Istanbul on his motorbike. Yet Recep is separate from this kind of life. Voice is also given to the difference between the lifestyles of Recep and rich people: "look at yourself! Do you look anything like us?" This question is voiced most recently in films like *Barda* (In the Bar) and *Mutluluk* (Bliss, 2007).

Recep is a man of fun and belongs to that realm hoodlums claim as their own, *alem*. Alem is that social sphere of the playful hoodlum where Güney's characters bring performance and play together. *Alem* brings with it village culture and adapts those living conditions to the urban environment: coffee chats with best buddies, drinking alcohol and eating all day – this is the real world for Recep. This world even has a lumpen king; the former ruler of the realm of fun gives a symbolic throne to Recep in one of their dialogues over alcohol. "Feel that power in you then you will be a king" says the veteran king of street hoodlums. Such transfer to lumpen power exists in *Cholera Street* as well.

After this ceremony Recep starts shaking things around and upsets the urban lumpen relations that turn toward rudimentary capitalist greed. He starts disturbing the organized crime scheme of Kaçakçı Mustafa, another lumpen who has set up a business of collecting protection money from local stores. First Recep beats Mustafa's men and then Mustafa himself. Recep redistributes the money he collects from the rich storeowner back to the poor. Recep calls this the bridge, earning his living by upsetting the balance of wealth from the rich to the poor. He introduces himself in every store before asking for money with the line: "We are building a *bridge* I hope you can help us". Once again just like it happened to Ali in *Blood Will Flow*, Recep's enemies unite against him. Meanwhile the rich spoiled girl falls in love with Recep. (A similar melodramatic turn is found in previous films like *Bitter Life* (Acı Hayat, 1961)). Recep beats all his enemies through a variety of antics (play). He is crazy as he enters his enemies' layers palming a hand grenade. His enemies are always weak cowards. The capitalist woman gives up her greedy urban capitalist ways to become Recep's woman.

Conclusion

Yılmaz Güney's early career as an actor produced a stereotype of two-dimensional characters, which we will call lumpen proletariat characters. These characters have been the representation of the on-screen persona of Güney presented through an anti-capitalist idiom and performance. Güney was heavily involved in the creation of these films as a shadow producer and screenwriter. These characters portray rural immigrant former peasants who cannot adapt to the capitalist consumerist norms in the big city. This person rejects being an individual in the capitalist western sense; he is a man of community, a common man who wants to belong to something bigger.

Güney's heroes resonate variety of concepts in the discourse of the lone anti-hero. These are *delikanlı*, *mazlum* and, *mağdur*. This person does not resist and accepts his fate in the beginning, but later on fights back alone against all odds. He expresses his discontent with anger, even using violent and illegal means such as theft to balance social justice. The lumpen character is happy when he has a full stomach, a woman he loves, and an okay-paying job. This is similar to today's immigrant needs in Turkey.

Yılmaz Güney's special place in Turkish political cinema of the 1960s is due to his charismatic portrayal of lumpen characters as anti-heroes. By carrying these heroes to the very people they portray Güney puts himself against the entire Turkish bourgeois cinema of the period, and he has done it in over 100 films. However, as Agah Özgüç has stated, 22 are still not available. A larger project would include character comparisons and discourse analyses of all these films. This writer hopes this article is, nonetheless, a small step in the right direction.

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